

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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The domestic servants and their employers in Salgótarján (1920-1944)

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The presentation and the analysis of the domestic servants of Salgótarján – a small industrial town in Northern Hungary – is a neglected issue of the town's social history. But, as the possession of domestic servants is a common feature among civil societies and one of the most frequent forms of female employment in the first half of the 20th century all over Europe, it can provide important information regarding gender history research. Therefore, it isn't a marginal segment of the life of a society. However, because of the few sources, it is difficult to draw a complete image regarding the domestic servants and their employers.

In this case, a unique source inspired and gave birth to this thesis. The Archives of Nógrád county is the only archive in the country holding the files of National Social Insurance Office regarding the data of local domestic servants¹. These files are arranged in ABC order after the name of the domestic servants' employe. The files contain the name of the domestic servant's employer, his adress and his profession, then in time order the names of the employed domestic servants with their names, their birth data, the beginning and the ending date of their employment – all this in the period between 1920-1944.

This type of source allowed first hand analysis because of the possibility to calculate statistical data, thus approaching from the structure and from the quantity – the favourite method of quantitative historiography. From this data, one can determine typical trends, providing a closer look into the society of domestic servants and their employers. However, the image gained only from this resource would stay black and white, because the individual destiny is left out, the unique is lost behind the numbers. Therefore, I have tried to get closer to the way of life of domestic servants and their employers, to their life strategy and to their roles loaded in the society of the town relying on other resources.

Many other sources were used and analyzed – documents of the mayor's office, birth registers, data of census, newspapers, process documents – to complete the data obtained from the above mentioned basic source, attempting to draw a more global view regarding the elite and the middle class of the town, as well as the domestic servants employed by them. I have tried to represent individual life situations and life paths in order to tincture with these „deep drillings” the mental image plenty of commonplaces, many times false but sometimes true, living in us, based on literary works, movies or family legends. Also, I have tried to find true stories and dispel myths and stereotypes in an effory to discover the true reality of the situation.

¹ Archives of Nógrád County: IX. 502. b.

During the writing process, I thought it very important that the researched area – which is situated narrowly in time and location – isn't absolutely separated from the macrohistorical structure. That is why I was trying to get closer the subjects of my thesis on putting the society of the domestic servants and their employees between broader framework – thus examining the relevant parts of the legal, economical, social, mental and gender history during my researches. I think the statistics and the individual, unique example can only give together a comprehensive image about the subject. I have tried to represent these very colorful part, the two ending of the society in several contexts – alternating the zoom – to reconstruct the functioning and the texture of the society³. Because as Kracauer wrote, the macro and microrealities are existing beside each other and they are authentic alike⁴. I was trying to use these methods alternately, but it is true that not only because of methodical reasons but because of the possibilities given by the sources as well.

After all the resources and the subject make possible to draw the unique and the average as well and in the same time open a path before using other historiographical methods. Both side of the resources: the domestic servants and their employees – composing the middle class of this specific industrial town – can be analyzed as well with the methods of the social historiography. In the same time during the analysis of the domestic servant class we can use the method of the gender history. Presenting the layer of the domestic servants can mean the presentation of the social role loaded by them, so can be approachable from the female employment. In the same time they were the loaders of a certain female gender role, or the participants of a servant-owner power relationship, or a special member of the family.

In my opinion every method enriches the analysis of these social layers, and clarifies the image, making it more total and colorful. I wanted to find the answer to the question of how much the way of life and the statistic data of these social layers was it similar to their companions living in the capital, or how much the domestic servants life was the same during this 25 years in Salgótarján. Did the economical crisis, the border changes after the 1st world war, and the consolidation of the political system have an effect on their life, on their number or their image without changes?

Before the presentation of the society of the domestic servants and their employers we have to place these social groups under examination in space and time. That is why I have described Salgótarján at that time, outlining a short historical background. I highlighted the importance of the industrialisation, because the development based on the mining of the brown coal found in the 19th century has defined the settlement structure and the society of the village of the town as well.

So the settlement at the end of the 19th century got stuck between the industrial sites formed from the north and the south determining its development. The style and the structure of the factory sites differed from the other parts of the town so the structure of the village was not integrated and welded together- they were functioning separately.

³ Szijártó M. István: Bevezetés In Mikrotörténelem: vívmányok és korlátok Miskolc, 2003. 16. p.

⁴ Sigfried Kracauer: Geschichte – Vor den letzten Dingen Frankfurt am Main, 1971 104-129. p.

Only after becoming a town did the formation of the urbanized image and the development of an integrated conception begin⁵.

Then I have examined under what circumstances were living the domestic servants and their employers of the town.

At the end of the 19th century two-thirds of the inhabitants of the village was composed of the stranger workers arrived there so the indigenous people of the village left its weight in this mass of people. After the turn of the century, the assimilation of the inhabitants has accelerated. and the major part of the foreigners went back to their homeland and the one who stayed have learned to speak Hungarian as well as their children. This process took about a half century.⁶ Since the turn of the century, the employees arrived from the neighbouring villages.

The new owners built in the frontage of the purchased peasant plot two level buildings with stores. The shops, coffee shops, restaurants, pubs were mostly operated by jewish citizens. So the Orthodox Israelits Community was founded in the summer of 1895⁷. The number of the dealers and the craftsmen was growing suddenly because the village was considered as the land of unlimited possibilities.

The bourgeoisie and intellectuels were also composed from the circle of migrants and were mostly connected to the factories and the mine. Their proportion didn't reach the half or the third of the national average, They have amounted to only 3% compared to the total population. They were living separated from the village in the colonies beside the factories, just barely joining to the life of the locality⁸. Citing Szabó Zoltán: „There isn't bourgeoisie in Salgótarján because it is impossible. Tarján became in one fell swoop from the village of landlords to the town of industrial factories and during this time there was no occasion to the development of the bourgeoisie. Even more so, because Salgótarján got to this way from under one lord to an other, from the landlord's possession to the capitalist oligarch. There wasn't intermediate time in the development of the town, and the space among the factories wher the bourgeoisie and the urbanisation could gain a foothold is also small.”⁹ Is that statement accurate? We were examining this question among the others processing the basic source.

The used source made possible to do a statistic about the professions of the employers. Utilizing these data I have classified the employers into the categories used in the censuses then after the selection of tree years (1931; 1936; 1941) an other statistic was made. In this place we don't show the chart made, but we try to show the conclusions. Because of the fact that the data were incomplete, we couldn't get exact results, but the figures allow to evinvce certain tendencies and correlations. Considering the numbers it is visible that in the period of peace the number of the employers of the domestic servants was growing from 254 to 267 (1931; 1936), maybe not with orders of magnitudes but regarding the small proportion of the inhabitants, 13 persons are not negligible. Looking

⁵ Salgótarjáni Új Almanach. Salgótarján 1997, 92. p.

⁶ Salgótarján története. Salgótarján Városi Tanács VB. 1972, 117. p.

⁷ Salgótarjáni Új Almanach. Salgótarján 1997, 110. p.

⁸ Salgótarján története. Salgótarján Városi Tanács VB. 1972, 122. p.

⁹ Szabó Zoltán: A tardi helyzet. Cifra nyomorúság. Budapest, 1986. 243. p.

at the data of 1941 we can experience a decline (256 employers), but it is still above the data of 1931.

In 1931 and 1936 the most part of the employers were merchants - in the first year 40,8% of the employers in the second 41,2% of them was working as a merchant. This proportion declined in 1941 to 31,1 %, which is a significant change compared to the earlier years. As the number of the employers in the examined three years are similar, we can hypothesize rightly that the decline of the proportion of the merchant employers of servant is in correlation with the coming into force of the Jewish laws. After the II. law legislated in 1939, every inhabitants having an industry license or a card industry had to announce his or her birth and religion data. The number of the industry licenses and cards industry was maximalized, the valid pub and restaurant licences and alcohol distribution licenses had to be cancelled in the next two years, then in 1944 the stores were officially closed as well.

The proportion of the artisans shows some decrease similar to the merchants. However the proportion of the employers classifiable to the categories of intellectuals and officers has grown to 1941, which is in connection with the decrease of the employers working as merchants or with the fact that these classes got to a better financial situation compared to their situation after WWI. In this category, the number of the employers working at the army or at the police shows a significant growth: It grows to the double from 1931 to 1936. All this can be explainable with the wartime situation and the fact, that in Salgótarján, because of the strike of the dissatisfied workers, the presence of the militants was necessary.

Look at the data of the census of the 1930 as well¹⁰. Accordingly to it, only 7% of the persons working in the category of public service and professional services were employing domestic servants. Regarding the same proportion in the case of the merchants is almost 14%, so nearly the double compared to the previous category. The category „industry” in case of the census includes the factory officials and workers as well, so it is difficult to analyze this data. Among more than four thousands persons working in the industry, possibly mostly workers, only 18 persons were employing domestic servants which amounts to 0,4 %.

We could partially compare the above mentioned data to the data of Budapest from 1930 and 1941. It was demonstrable that there were similarities, for example the proportion of the landlords employing domestic servants was very similar: in Budapest it was in both years 2%, while in Salgótarján it was 1,4%. However the proportion of employers of the domestic servants working as craftsmen and merchants in Salgótarján were much more higher: in 1941 for example the 31,1% of the employers of the domestic servants were merchants, 14,1% were craftsmen, while in Budapest it was 10,8 +5% (together with the supporting staff) and 7,7%+5%. The situation was the opposite in case of the officers: in Salgótarján the 13,2% of the employers of the domestic servants were public officials in 1931 while in Budapest this proportion was 17,1 % one year earlier. Despite of the fact that we can't compare the data one-to-one because of the different categories, it is visible that in the capital the base of the layers employing the domestic servants were the public

¹⁰ Az 1930. évi Népszámlálás II. rész Foglalkozási adatok községek és külterületi lakotthelyek, továbbá az ipari és kereskedelmi nagyvállalatok. Szerk: Magyar kir. KSH 1934. 488. p.

officials and the intellectuals because they were sharing the half of the all households employing domestic servants¹¹. In Salgótarján the same layers amounted only the third of the Budapest, the majority was merchants, craftsmen and employes in the industry. This fact is for sure in connection with the industrial nature of the town.

Hereinafter the different layers of the employers of the domestic servants were represented - at first the urban elite, then the official working at public service, the freelance intellectuals, the intellectuals, the intellectuals and the officers of the factories, the merchants and the traders.

After representing and analyzing the different social layers employing the domestic servants we were examining their lifestyle, their life strategies. For that we were scanning their schooling habits, their participation in the cultural and society life of the town.

As follows I was examining the domestic servants lifestyle in the light of the housing situation. I was describing how the factories and the towns tried to solve the housing shortage. I have tried to show the material culture of the houses with some inheritance inventories and pictures as well. Then after the identification on the census curves of 1941 of the employers of the domestic servants we have shown that only around 10% of them was owning their own house or flat, and 35% of them was living in a house offered by their employers. The remaining vast majority was living in a house or flat rented from an individual.

In the next half of the thesis the other side, the society of the domestic servants were examined. At first we had to define the notion of servant, then we placed them among the other worker layers underlining its special nature.

In the era examined by the thesis, the domestic servants were already considered as wagedworkers whose worktime was disposed by her employer. Regarding their origins they were mostly poor peasants who went to work into town to earn the price of the dowry. Back to the village they were the introductors of the urban kitchen, bourgeois life style and attitude.

But why the work of a domestic servant is a special kind of work? The lifestyle associated with this work - the close relationship with the family, the coexistence distinguishes it from every other work, so its examination can not be separated from the examination of the institute of the family, of the functions and activities in a family, as well as the interpersonal relations in a family. So the domestic servant is the part of the life of the family without being its member. The head of the family is her employers, but she is living in a paternalist dependence from him. For the ambitious bourgeoisie the employment of the domestic servants became a status symbol who was treated with condescending manners, using a shrill sound to make feel the social dominance. The ladies were expecting the hand kiss, the appropriate salutation even they allowed for themselves the corporal punishment.

All that shows that in the civil society the work of the domestic servants was characterized by duality - a transition between the patriarchal dependence and the

¹¹ Gyáni Gábor: Család, háztartás és a városi cselédség Budapest, 1983. 41. p.

employment regulated by a contract. The domestic servant status had a generating effect in the urban migration as well as a dominant role in the female employment. The domestic servants in Budapest and in the countryside as well were composed from the migrants coming from the villages. In the examined era the one-fourth then one-fifth of the female employees were working as domestic servants, which was only barely less than the proportion of the female workers working in the industry¹².

We have represented the legal background of the domestic servant work confirming the above claims.

The domestic servant work was not present in the public opinion as a questioned social phenomenon. The touched part of the public opinion was mostly worried about the fluctuation of the domestic servants' labor market.

This fluctuation is well confirmed by the data of the processed records - they show that in Salgótarján, between 1920-1944 71% of the domestic servants worked for 6 months or less at the same employer, 67% of them worked only at one employer, 21,5% changed employer 2-3 times, 11,5 % has changed employer four or more times¹³. This continuous change, the domestic workers' constant move between the work places caused temporary unemployment. The one who did not find work had to go home immediately.

As we said all that is traceable to the fact that the servant work was filling a determined lifecycle of the concerned young women approximately between the age of 15-30 to prepare the marriage financially and role-like as well.

We examined the different form of the job search demonstrating the informal and formal channels of it, presenting the local employment agencies.

We were examining the age of the domestic servants, their marital status and the correlations between them. As we have mentioned, the domestic servant work in the women's life regarding the vast majority, was a temporary status between the young adult age (sometimes childhood) and the wedding - that is why the average age of the domestic servants was low, 24 years¹⁴.

The calculated data regarding the domestic servants in Salgótarján are similar to the national data: the 43% of the domestic servants was younger than 20 years old, 29 % of them was between 20-25 years old, 28% of them was older than 25 years old. So almost three quarters was younger than 25 years old in Salgótarján and in Budapest as well¹⁵. After the processed records the youngest servant was 11, the oldest one was 78 years old. Most of the domestic servants were unmarried, less of them were widow or married. In Salgótarján 9,1% was married and only 3,2% of them was widow. As the married domestic servants' average age was 36 years against the 23,5 years average age of the unmarried ones we can assume that they were working beside their relatively big

¹² Nagy Bea: Nők kereső tevékenysége Budapesten a 20. század első felében. In: Férfiuralom. Szerk.: Hadas Miklós, Bp. 1994.

¹³ Nógrád County Archives: IX. 502. b.

¹⁴ Nógrád County Archives: IX. 502 b.

¹⁵ Gyáni Gábor: Család, háztartás és a városi cselédség Budapest. 1983 61-63. p.

children not at the beginning of their marriage to contribute to their families' budget. It is very probable that they were working as non-resident cleaning women

The widow domestic servants' average age in Salgótarján was naturally higher: 43,6 years, among them was the above mentioned oldest servant as well.

Staying at the data processed about the basic source, the average employment length regarding every servants was 6,59 months. The married domestic servants were working a little bit longer compared to that: 7,07 months at one employer, the widows were working during 9,26 months at the same employer in average. The average age of the servants working less than one year was 23 years old, the ones working 1-5 years were in average 24 years old, the ones working 5 – 10 years were in average 30 years old, the ones working more than 10 years were in average 33 years old.

Then we continued with the psychological side of the servant work – it was special because of the particular interlacement of the public and the private sphere¹⁶. It is a work using housewife skills, savoir-faire learned at home transforming into a professional competence paid. That is why it is underestimated by the society and the economic as well. This kind of employment comes into being in general between two women. As the space of the work is a private space – the house or the flat – and the activity correspond to the housewife role which involves that the lady of the house is scared unconsciously of losing her legitimacy as housewife despite the fact that she does not want to do the tasks accompanying the role. That is why the relationship between the mistress and the domestic servant is full of open and hidden conflict and tension. It was not only the consequences of the above mentioned but the result of the fact that there were two completely different cultures and lifestyles in the narrow space of a house or a flat: the urban-bourgeois and the rural-peasant. Moreover the power relationship had a negative effect to the behavior of both of them, to their personal relationship which was their employment as well. The mistress avenged many times on the servant her own subordinate position with her husband and vice versa: because of her vulnerability the domestic servant found every instrument rightful to the validation of her interests.

Then we were examining the lifestyle of the domestic servants. Where were they sleeping, resting? What did they do in their free time?

After all we were examining the deviances regarding the servants. As we said, they were in a temporary life situation as we said between the childhood and the marriage. They left the paternal house early, torn from their familial environment very young and immature. So the frequency of the deviant behaviors – prostitution, suicides, illegitimate births – was due to the rootlessness, emotional neglect, big city life and the desire for love.

Processing the data of the birth records, we saw that in Salgótarján between 1919-1944 11 107 live births were occurred among them in all 870 were extramarital, which is 7,83% accordingly to the national average¹⁷.

¹⁶ Gyáni Gábor: Társadalmi nemek a munkaerőpiacon a polgári Magyarországon in: Rubicon 2009. 4. szám

¹⁷ Nógrád County Archives: XXXIII. 1. a.

In Salgótarján among the 870 mother 113 were working as domestic servants, so the 12,98% of the mothers giving birth without a father which is lower than the national average – we only have data from 1901 to compare after which in one quarter of the cases was the mother working as domestic servant.

Regarding the age of the mother we had the following data: among the mothers giving birth outside marriage 11,2% of the mothers of Salgótarján were under 20 years old, 43 % of them were between 20-24 years old, 34,5% of them were between 25-29 years old, 11,3 % of them were 30 years old or more, similarly to the national average. After the national statistics 26-27% of the mothers giving birth in marriage were between 20-24 years old, and they were giving birth in greater numbers above 30: 41% of them gave birth in that age. So the fertility inside or outside marriage was differing. The younger domestic servants were giving birth with bigger chances outside marriage.

We could find several civil and criminal process discussed in the court of Balassagyarmat in which domestic servants from Salgótarján had a role. Unfortunately we could not make statistic as the documents have survived only partially and in the reference books the profession of the litigants are not mentioned. However we can find examples for the above mentioned deviant behaviors in the process documents supporting their occurrence in Salgótarján as well. We were examining the documents of the criminal proceedings we could see that the girls committing crimes were very young, under twenty years old, all coming from broken families. They did not committed serious crimes, they were before the court because of theft, truancy, illegal abortion.

The next subchapter of the thesis was an interview made with an ex domestic servant who were working at first in Mátraszele, than the close Salgótarján before her wedding. Gizi's story, who lost her mom at age of two. confirmed in many point the average servant story – for example her origin from a broken family - , but it was in contradiction with it too.

As the high average she began to work as young girl, from age of 17 until age of 23 and was earning money for the trousseau. He came from a village to Salgótarján, but not from a peasant family as her dad was a baker. She was working at the same place for long, differently from the average. Her employers, especially at the second house, were handling her as a family member, so she was well, she was not rootless despite of the fact she was half-orphan and that she was in a town, in that time scale far away from her home. After her domestic servant years she did not stay in the town, because her marriage, her husband work binded her to Mátraszele.

Finally we were examining through the history of the family the characteristics of the domestic servants work, the ways of the social mobility, the consequences of a deviant life episode showing, that there was out of the woods from a hopeless situation as well.

Summarizing the results of the research we can declare that the examination of the domestic servants employment in the urban society can be a way to define the bourgeoisie of a town, in this case the bourgeoisie of Salgótarján – thanks to the source either by name. We emphasize that the used source is extremely unique, because the employers of the domestic servants in Salgótarján could be identified by name, address

and profession, which can be considered as the census of the elite and the middle class of the town.

Regarding the statistic side of the research we could show, that only the 3,4 % of the working population could employ a domestic servant in the middle of the examined era. We diagnose it was a very low proportion and was referring to a narrow bourgeoisie compared to the data about Budapest, especially because we stated that only the 8% of the persons working at public services and at professional services could afford the employment of the domestic servants. These are the professional categories which formed the base of the Hungarian special gentleman middle class. However we accept that the narrowing-worsening financial options don't exclude someone absolutely from the member of the middle class if otherwise his literacy, education, lifestyle or relationship network list him there.

We convinced that the above mentioned proportion regarding the dealers is close to 14%, so almost the double than in the precedent professional category. In Salgótarján, they were in the financial situation which was enough good to afford the employment of domestic servants, so they were representing a significant layer of the bourgeoisie.

We can not accept the angular opinion of the contemporary author after which the bourgeoisie or middle class in Salgótarján did not exist, because given from the industrial nature of the town and its rapid growth there was a big demand from the part of the labourers, engineers, officers, soldiers, teachers, lawyers, doctors etc. for commercial services, and artisans as well.

Using every reachable and findable source, comparing the names in the database to the ones in other sources, we were examining the political and public life role of the employers of domestic servants, their activity in the society life, their housing situation, their life style, their material culture, the schooling of their children. We constated, that they were continuing a bourgeois life style although in the frame of a small town.

Processing the data regarding the domestic servant of the basic source we constated, that the domestic servants make part of the society of a small town as well, although in lower number. Regardless of their age, the length of their employment is similar to the general trends. The deviant behaviors are also present than in the capital. We only could prepare statistics regarding the illegitimate births, but we were researching and processing many sources about other cases of the deviant behaviors – as for exemple several court processes. We could compare individual life stories based on an interview and on a family research to the historical narrative and the statistics.

Examining personal stories, strategies it was visible that these individual stories confirm many times the average and the statistics, the specific trends and the assumption of the historians, but they are at least as well shading them pointing that we have to be careful with the generalization and the conclusion. We could see that the vast majority of the domestic servants were working before the marriage, during a relatively short period of time, spending short time at the same place.

In contrast to the actual and contemporary domestic servant narrative, we could know an ex domestic servant who as a half-orphan was honestly working for long time at the same families then building a successful family life. We could see, that a domestic servant giving birth to an illegitimate child could create a successful family, with a successful business – so the fallenness was not necessary. However the offenders of the processed

crime cases were underprivileged in some respects, born in a poor family, grown up without mother or father. I did not find any case when a girl coming from a good family background (not wealthy but caring and loving) committed a crime. All that reinforces the contemporary discourse describing the dangers of the prostitution and advertising the appropriate treatment with the domestic servant – as well as the contemporary narrative which emphasize the specificity of the domestic work, its total and vulnerable nature regarding the time and the place of the work, utilising the body and the psychic for a very low salary.

We saw as well from the personal stories, that in contrast of the statistics, the clichés, the historical narratives, the movies and the literal examples, it was very possible to feel in safe at the family she was serving thanks to the human treatment and the recognition towards her work.

The domestic servants were really acquiring the later female roles preparing for marriage and the maternity and she became the mediator of the bourgeois lifestyle between the town and the village undertaking that proud.

I think this thesis is an example of the fact that a system's function and structure can only give a whole picture if it is shaded by the microworld too and vice versa: the individual is only complete if the society is visible behind it with its functioning¹⁸. I was trying to satisfy this approach with my work.

¹⁸ Gyáni Gábor: A mindennapi élet, mint kutatási probléma in Aetas 1997. 1.